Gender Dimensions in the Fiction of Ngugi Wa Thiongo

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Abstract
This paper provides a critical overview of the treatment of the questions of identity and gender in Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s work. Specifically, the study analyses Ngugi's Weep Not, Child, The River Between, A Grain of Wheat, Petals of Blood, Devil on the Cross, and Wizard of the Crow while paying attention to various strategies which women use to respond to patriarchy. The issue of identity is explored against the backdrop of the experiences of slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism and globalization in Africa. Finally the paper explores the maturity of the novelist’s feminist vision. Ngugi's works witness the rebirth of women characters and how they begin to acquire new identities. The women move from self ignorance to awareness, assurance, and self-reliance. Ngugi has tried to recreate a living past.

Keywords: Identity, Gender, Patriarchal society, Colonialism.
1. Introduction

Thiongo is an internationally acclaimed African writer and human rights activist. Kenyan Novelist, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s latest work of fiction, Wizard of the Crow (2006), provides a continuum of the authors’ literary career spanning over a period of 40 years. His novels, particularly, seem to present a consistent revision of thought, style, content and characterization all the way through Weep Not Child (1964), The River Between (1965), A Grain of Wheat (1967), Petals of Blood (1977), Devil on the Cross (1983) and Matigari (1986) His other publications include a collection of short stories, Secret Lives, (1977) the plays; The Black Hermit (1963) This Time Tomorrow (1970), The Trial of Dedan Kimathi - with Michere Mugo, (1976) and I Will Marry When I Want, - with Ngugi wa Mirii (1977). He has frequently been regarded as a likely candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature He has usually championed for the promotion of African women and other marginalized groups in the African society. Ngugi in his fictional works delineates the exploitation of the Africans by the Whites and the consequential effect of such exploitation on the lives of the Africans. He wants to project the African woman as a survivor of the harshest conditions. It exposes a number of the patriarchal challenges and constraints imposed upon helpless women by traditional African societies. The women move from self ignorance to awareness, assurance, and self-reliance. Ngugi has tried to recreate a living past. His female characters become primary sites for testing the reconciliation of betrayal and hope as well as the possibility of regeneration. The issue of identity is explored against the backdrop of the experiences of slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism and globalization in Africa. In this paper we propose to have a critical overview of the novelist’s treatment of the question of identity, politics and gender in his novels.

2. Identity

The question of Identity and the African personality runs deep into African history. Throughout history, the aim has been uniform; to uproot or distort the cultural identity of the African people for ultimate economic gain of the Western World. The continuum of subjugation of the African people through slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism and now globalization has led to the creation of a postcolonial personality who is trapped in a contradictory Western civilization. This process has been perfected through cultural imperialism over time. Ngugi’s firm belief that change is a gradual process as reflected in the novel’s subject of study. While the early three novels reflect traditional African values of
motherhood and are more connected to African feminism, Wizard of the Crow breaks new grounds as women acquire more experience and conquer more fields towards empowering themselves through the resistance devices based on such concepts as sisterhood and female consciousness. In this sense, they managed to prove themselves as superior to men. It exposes a number of the patriarchal challenges and constraints imposed upon helpless women by traditional African societies. Actually, the central themes of female assertiveness and post-independence dilemma of the motherland permeate Ngugi’s novels. His approach evokes a veneration of the African woman with "mountains on her back." According to The Wizard of the Crow, Tajirika is suffering from a severe dose of ‘White-ache.’ (P. 180). This is after he realizes that with his new position he would end up being the richest man in Africa and the only thing missing to distinguish him from the other rich black people is a white skin (179-180). Tajirika is sick with colonial brainwashing. He is held captive by the mirage created by a postcolonial sickness in which the African petty bourgeoisie has continuously sought to be refined slaves of the West. In order for Tajirika to come to terms with his aspired white destiny, the Wizard of the Crow - Kamiti Wa Karimiri- suggest a number of options. He must begin by becoming a willing slave of the west and demonstrate this by giving up his name. Secondly he must lose his language and finally marry a white woman and become English. But the only English identity that he can assume is that of ‘a punk, a prostitute or at best a homeless ex-colonial’ (P. 179-188). This final option shocks Tajirika and his wife Virginia into a temporary cure: “No! No! Tajirika and Virginia shouted, opening their eyes in fright. “Black is beautiful. Give us back our blackness,” they moaned as if the Wizard Njogu Waita International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL) (P. 47) of the Crow had already shorn them of it (P.188). Nevertheless Tajirika cannot wholly be cured of this disease. When his fortune turns round for the better and he becomes a minister in the government, the demons of whiteness becon him. He identifies a company in the United States, Genetica International, which specializes in genetic engineering, cloning, transplants and plastic surgery. Here a person can be changed to any identity they desire. Tajirika engages this company to give him a white identity. By the time the company is exposed as fake, Tajirikla has acquired a white arm and a white leg (P.741-742). Through the character of Tajirika, Ngugi attempts to understand the problems of identity for the African especially for the African elite. They are presented as akin to Amos Tutuola’s ‘complete gentleman’ in The Palm Wine Drinkard (1958). The complete
A gentleman has no body of his own. In order to visit his fiancée, he borrows different body parts from different people but has to return them to the owners at some point (P. 240). The critical question raised in the novel is why the disease of contradicting identities continues to afflict the African, especially ‘the educated and the rich’ (p.223). The African identity seems to be in a permanent state of transition. The African then continues to exist in an unredeemed state of alienation. In order to emerge from this state the novel suggests that the African must recapture his identity in the mirror of the Wizard of the Crow.

3. GENDER

Wizard of the Crow presents the woman in the post colony is a person who is trapped in many ways. She is trapped in the patriarchal and the colonial past as well as by the emerging male elite in independent Aburiria. The novel captures the position of African woman as complicated by a composite of oppressive forces, making her condition unique and different from that of woman from the Western world. Apart from patriarchy, the struggles of the African Woman and her sister in the African Diaspora have also been in the context of realities of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. In the discarded ‘political catechism’ of Nyawira, the black woman is presented as the most oppressed woman: She is oppressed on account of her colour like all black people in the world; she is oppressed on account of her gender like all women in the world; and she is exploited and oppressed on account of her class like all workers and peasants in the world. The ruthless of patriarchal oppression is epitomized in the treatment of Rachael by her husband the ruler of Aburiria. When she questions his sexual transgressions against school girls, she is banished to a mansion built on seven acres of land where the ruler attempts to freeze her life in time and space. Virginia, the wife of Tajirika on the other hand represents the woman who is trapped in postcolonial structures of the political elite. Although living in the modern age, her husband views her as a lesser being rather than an equal partner. She is continuously in dire need for domestication and her husband views beating her as his male prerogative . The novelist however rejects the gender stereotypes. He presents Virginia firstly as an astute and organized woman who manages the domestic and the business spheres excellently when her husband is incarcerated. Secondly when her husband metes violence against her, she overcomes her fears and demands to be treated humanely by her male partner. She reports the incident to the Wizard of the Crow who in turn organizes a women’s court that punishes Tajirika . Nevertheless, in spite of her rising consciousness, Virginia is unable to transcend the glass box of her current
middle class status. To the very end of the novel, she still clings to her status as the wife of the political elite and savors the benefits of that position by having a face- and breast-lift for herself as her husband is partly transformed into a white man. (Njogu Waita, International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature). She apparently has been unable to transcend what De Beauvoir refers to the woman’s ‘otherness’ and become ‘self.’ She is unable to overcome the definitions, labels and essences that limit her existence. In the character of Grace Nyawira, Wizard of the Crow provides insights to an emerging feminine consciousness that rejects traditional gender roles and moves beyond the traditional male/female dichotomy in gender analysis. The novel promotes a positive image of women, decries transgressions against women and projects what Learner refers to as ‘a feminine vision and consciousness of society’. Nyawira is indeed a revision of the author’s earlier female characters all the way from Nyambura (River Between) Mwihaki (Weep Not Child), Mumbi (A Gain of Wheat), Wanja (Petals of Blood), Waringa (Devil on the Cross) and Guthera in Matigari. In Nyawira, Ngugi creates a character that is at the centre striving to create a new identity. He presents a mature feminine vision of a woman ready to confront the social, cultural and political challenges of postcolonial Africa in the 21st Century. Nyawira is born into the middle class but as her consciousness develops, she rejects her father’s empty materialism. She marries the poor artist, Kaniuru against her father’s wishes. When she realizes that Kaniuru married her with his nose and eyes on her father’s property, she divorces him and strikes out on her own. In the novel the author presents her as an astute organizer not only of women but for the larger Movement for the Voice of the People. She represents a new consciousness of a woman who can provide meaningful political leadership in a collective effort to heal the land. In her union with Kamiti Wa Karimiri, Nyawira is also ‘the Wizard of the Crow’ and in the pair is the symbol of the indomitable human spirit, a spirit that can never die, a spirit that can consistently resist the constant cycles of repression and exploitation in postcolonial Africa. As the character, Constable Arigagai Gathere puts it; “let nobody lie to you, the Wizard of the Crow will never die. True, Haki ya Mungu” (P.766).

The study attempts to mark the notable development in Ngugi’s strategies of empowerment in novel after novel. Ngugi also seems to have a strong belief that change is gradual and needs long-term tactics. The article applies some feminist and womanist theories to the novels under study. It is quite obvious that African women have often been subjected to negative stereotypes and their contributions have been neglected or even omitted. The
exclusion of females from social settings and their being denied rightful opportunities to stand up for themselves in their communities also "give substance to the marginalization of females from important decision making processes in their communities and families." (Peter, 2010, p. 203) Ngugi attacks the traditional female discourse of the African woman as being dominated, exploited, abused and merely used as a beast of burden. Like many other African societies, the Kenyan society is essentially patriarchal; hence men are considered to be more superior to women. Such a society is characterized by "male super ordination and female subordination." Ngugi's early novels assume the influence of an African narrative tradition and culture, where portrayals of the African woman’s experiences reaffirm her position and power within African conceptions of the world.

Conclusion:

Ultimately, Ngugi's novels argue that patriarchy is both oppressive and retrogressive to women and the society, and therefore it should be discontinued. As Ngugi suggests, the recognition of gender empowerment, equity, and partnership is the only fair and effective method of ensuring distribution of resources in the society. Indeed, for the progress of the society, this principle should be guarded at all cost by both men and women.

The novels of Ngugi are fully contemporary. They reveal the authors’ sincere striving, through the freedom of postcolonial fiction, to change Africa into a freer and more unbiased continent. In the words of Mphahlele (1974: 78), writers such as Ngugi “came in during the most exciting epoch in African life - at a time when things are taking shape”. Ngugi himself succeeded in full filling their roles as the “sensitive needles” of society: they have definitely reflected “with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions” in their transforming societies.
References:


------------------ Women in Cultural Work. The fate of Kamirrithu People’s theatre in Kenya.